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NEWS MEDIA CONTACTS:
Joe Davis, 202/586-4940
Bryan Wilkes, 202/586-7371

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DOE Surpasses Congressional Target of Recovering Radioactive Sources

WASHINGTON, DC – The Department of Energy (DOE) has surpassed a congressional target of recovering and securing 5,000 radioactive sources domestically within an 18-month time period, Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham said today. These radioactive materials could be used in a radiological dispersal device, also known as a "dirty bomb." The Department's National Nuclear Security Administration passed the congressional target this month by recovering and securing 5,529 high-risk sources during the specified time-period.

As a key part of Secretary Abraham's efforts to strengthen DOE's activities to address the threats posed by radiological materials, he established DOE's Nuclear and Radiological Threat Reduction Task Force in November 2003. The task force consolidated three existing DOE programs to address international and domestic radiological materials into one office, and accelerated and expanded these efforts.

"We are continuing to work overtime to secure and recover radioactive materials that can be used for dangerous purposes. The national security effort we are involved in to recover these materials with other U.S. agencies is vital to the safety and security all Americans," Abraham said.

Secretary Abraham said the DOE continues recovering at-risk radiological materials domestically at universities, hospitals, and other locations. Because of the Bush administration's priority on nonproliferation, the Nuclear and Radiological Threat Reduction Task Force accelerated its efforts, which has resulted, to date, in the recovery of over 9,500 high-risk radiological sources within the United States.

The announcement marks the recent one-year anniversary of the March 2003 International Conference on the Security of Radioactive Sources held in Vienna, Austria, which was co-sponsored by the United States, Russia, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Since the conference, DOE has initiated important radiological threat reduction efforts in over 25 countries and is planning to expand its cooperation to 40 by the end of this calendar year.

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The conference, called for and co-chaired by the Secretary, was attended by 123 nations and resulted in recommendations to mitigate the threat posed by at-risk radiological materials around the world. In his remarks at the time, the Secretary said, "It is our critically important job to deny terrorists the radioactive sources they need to construct such weapons." Then, Abraham announced a new radiological security partnership program with the IAEA to address dangerous radiological materials globally as well as accelerate current efforts.

As part of these activities, DOE provided critical security enhancements to secure high-risk radiological materials in Uzbekistan. The materials removed had been housed in the immediate vicinity of a recent terrorist attack in Tashkent. The Secretary noted that DOE is working hard to address the radiological threats in other areas as well that are critical to U.S. national security interests, including Iraq and Greece, in support of the upcoming Olympic games.

In the past three months, the task force has had two key achievements. It recovered four high-risk Strontium-90 Radioisotopic Thermoelectric Generators (RTGs) in the Houston area in close cooperation with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and Texas officials. These were the largest high risk sources recovered to date by the task force. This effort served as a model of cooperation between DOE and other U.S. national security agencies. Just last month, the task force recovered, in close cooperation with the NRC and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection's Bureau of Radiation Protection, approximately 500 at-risk radiological sources from a bankrupt company in Pennsylvania. The task force is also exploring additional ways within the U.S. to leverage DOE's expertise and experience in reducing the threat posed by radiological materials that could be used to make a dirty bomb.

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